TESTIMONY OF
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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND TRANSPORTATION
UNITED STATES SENATE
APRIL 27, 1999

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Committee today to describe the Department's Commercial Motor Vehicle Safety program activities and our plans for the future.

President Clinton and Secretary Slater have repeatedly stated that the safety of all of our nation's transportation systems is our Department's highest priority -- a commitment we owe to the American people. Safety is of critical importance to Secretary Slater and all the employees of the Department, and, of course, to you, Mr. Chairman, and this Committee. Our transportation system cannot only be about moving people and goods efficiently. We must ensure that people can travel safely, even as we increase mobility and accommodate new travel and economic demand.

Mr. Chairman, we wish to thank you for focusing attention on motor carrier safety. The human toll of transportation crashes is devastating. The Department is committed to reducing deaths and injuries to the maximum degree possible. The American people deserve nothing less. In partnership with Congress, the Department has made progress improving motor carrier safety. We especially appreciate this Committee's leadership in the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21) to provide stronger enforcement tools, stiffer penalties for violators, and funding for better motor carrier safety information systems. Continuing to work together in this fashion, we believe we can save more lives.

THE COMMERCIAL MOTOR VEHICLE SAFETY CHALLENGE

The motor carrier industry has grown and changed dramatically since the creation of the Department of Transportation in 1967, especially in recent years as the economy has boomed. There are now more than 490,000 business entities -- including 13,000 motor coach operators -- and 6 million drivers subject to federal and state safety oversight. There are more than 7 million large trucks traveling almost 200 billion miles on the Nation's highways each year. That growth necessarily increases the potential for large truck crashes. In the face of this growth, the fatality rate per million truck vehicle miles traveled (VMT) has declined over the past decade. But that is not enough. While the fatality rate has dropped, the actual number of annual truck-related fatalities has remained around 5,000 since 1969. In 1997, the last year for which statistics are complete, 5,355 deaths occurred in heavy truck crashes, and another 133,000 persons were injured. These numbers are unacceptably high, resulting in enormous personal loss for victims and their families.

Fatalities and injuries must be reduced. We must raise the national consciousness about this problem. All of us must work harder to do our part to improve safety. We intend to break through the 5,000 fatality plateau of large truck-involved crashes, and to continue on a path that leads to fewer and fewer of these tragedies. We want to work with this Committee to achieve that goal.

THE DEPARTMENT'S COMPREHENSIVE PROGRAM

Mr. Chairman, the Department of Transportation and its state partners have comprehensive motor carrier safety efforts that involve the coordination of the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), the Research and Special Programs Administration (RSPA), the Federal Transit Administration (FTA), and the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA), and state safety and law enforcement agencies. The programs of the different modal administrations within the Department are complementary and synergistic. The staffs of these agencies continually work in a collaborative ONEDOT fashion to achieve our collective goal of reducing fatalities in crashes involving trucks and buses. The program focuses on the key areas that contribute to crashes, namely:

- **Drivers** - ensuring that professional drivers are qualified and licensed, trained, medically fit, and alert and fully attentive to their driving task, and that all drivers sharing the road understand how to operate their vehicles safely in traffic streams with a mix of different vehicle types.

- **Vehicles** - ensuring they are manufactured and equipped with appropriate safety technologies and that they are well-maintained for safe operation.

- **Highway Infrastructure Environment** - designing the roadway environment to safely accommodate large vehicles, while incorporating the latest features to minimize driver errors and mitigate their consequences when they do occur; and ensuring that the latest sensing, signaling, and communication technologies are applied to make truck travel safer.

- **Motor Carrier Operations** - ensuring that carriers employ sound safety management systems to oversee their operations and using data to compare carrier performance against overall industry safety performance.

- **Hazardous Materials Transportation** - addressing the unique challenges of transporting hazardous materials (HM) safely on the highways, including requirements for safe handling and routing, packaging, marking and labeling of HM shipments and containers, and ensuring that emergency response personnel are equipped and trained to competently respond to mishaps when they occur.

- **Technology** - bringing advanced technologies to drivers, vehicles, and roadway safety to achieve a significant breakthrough in saving lives. Major programs are underway to improve driver behavior and reduce human error, identify and warn of vehicle mechanical

problems, target high risk carriers and improve effectiveness and coverage of roadside inspections.

Long term trends in highway crash, injury, and fatality statistics indicate that this program has helped reduce the rate of crashes, injuries and fatalities. Nevertheless, we believe it can be improved.

The design of the Interstate highway system has been notably effective in improving safety. The fatality rate for all vehicles on the Interstate is about half the rate on all other roads. This is especially important for large trucks, because approximately 40 percent of all truck miles of travel nationally occur on the Interstate highways.

The safety performance of trucks and the maintenance of safety systems such as brakes have improved markedly. The proportion of inspected vehicles found with hazardous defects has dropped significantly over the past ten years. The introduction of antilock braking systems, along with the development of on-board diagnostics and safety warning systems, promises to reduce further the risk of crashes attributable to vehicle performance and mechanical condition.

Federal and State efforts to screen and better qualify truck drivers have also been effective. This Committee is to be commended for legislation establishing the Commercial Driver's License (CDL) program. The introduction of the CDL and development of the national Commercial Driver License Information System (CDLIS) have made it possible for Federal and State safety officials to remove illegal and unqualified commercial vehicle drivers from the roadway. Improved medical screening and training will strengthen the licensing program.

PLANS FOR ADDITIONAL IMPROVEMENTS IN THE PROGRAM

We continually search for ways to improve our safety programs. Thus, we believe the Department's Inspector General's periodic reviews and oversight of the motor carrier safety component of our program are very useful. The OIG's 1997 report, for example, included many recommendations which were in the Department's recent reauthorization proposal and which were supported by this Committee and ultimately adopted in TEA-21. These changes included stiffer motor carrier penalty provisions, new shutdown authority for unfit carriers, additional funding for implementation of the Performance and Registration Information Management System (PRISM), and other improvements to the Federal Highway Administration's motor carrier information systems. These provisions will substantially bolster program performance and enhance safety as they become fully implemented.

The OIG's most recent report highlights a number of areas where opportunities exist for further improvement, notably in the areas of enforcement and safety information tracking systems. The Department considers many of the recommendations to be very constructive. Actions are already underway to address them.

We recognize that we must now move towards stronger enforcement, particularly for repeat offenders. To that end, the new leadership in the FHWA's Motor Carrier and Highway

Safety Program Office has issued guidance to its field staff directing that each safety investigator conduct a minimum of four carrier compliance reviews per month. Additionally, the Department intends to make full use of the of new higher penalty and shutdown provisions of TEA-21, balancing their use with the constraining requirements of the 1984 Motor Carrier Safety Act and the Small Business Regulatory Enforcement Fairness Act of 1996. The resulting program is designed to encourage voluntary compliance by the vast majority of carriers while ensuring that those who fail to improve are penalized.

Our enforcement programs will be greatly enhanced through the use of the FHWA's PRISM information system. This system establishes links between the motor vehicle and licensing processes of the States and information gathered in the Federal and State commercial motor vehicle (CMV) enforcement programs. These links provide a powerful tool for measuring the performance of high risk companies. State vehicle registration privileges can be suspended for companies which do not show improvement.

Each year, through its Motor Carrier Safety Assistance Program (MCSAP), FHWA also funds more than 33,000 inspections of buses and increases the number of MCSAP officers trained to conduct motorcoach inspections by 500. FHWA is conducting special strike forces to highlight the importance of motorcoach safety and has been working closely with NTSB and New Jersey to investigate recent crashes in that State. A study to determine the factors that affect bus driver fatigue and stress is also underway.

Improving the quality of safety data is a continuous process. While significant improvements in data quality and timeliness have been achieved over the past several years, action is being taken to make further improvements. FHWA's SAFETYNET information system is being expanded to include driver traffic violation information. FHWA has also asked the governors of each state to ensure that truck and bus drivers who have shown a pattern of risk-taking behavior cannot continue to drive a commercial motor vehicle under a special license. Additional incentive funds will be made available to states to obtain more complete and timely crash data and better information relating to violations of local traffic laws. Continuing to expand the use of computerized laptop software by roadside inspectors will greatly improve the accuracy of carrier identification information while vastly reducing the time required to submit vehicle and driver inspection data. Finally, we know we need better information on crash causation, and this year FHWA and NHTSA will embark on a multi-year effort to research this critical area.

On the technology front many projects are underway to foster the development and use of advanced technologies by carriers as well as Federal and State inspection officials. One is a research program to speed up and improve the effectiveness and accuracy of roadside inspections. Using real-time systems which scan vehicles with a variety of optical recognition systems, it will be possible in the future to link a vehicle to the identity of the motor carrier responsible for the safety of that vehicle and its operator. The system will enable inspectors to target and prioritize their inspection efforts to those carriers, vehicles, and drivers most in need of attention. Similarly, research has been completed identifying a number of advanced technology performance-based brake testers which not only identify deficiencies but also provide diagnostic information to enable quick and effective repairs. These machines are now eligible for MCSAP funding.

To ensure that we achieve these objectives, the Department is in the process of amending its FY 2000 budget request to seek an additional $50 million in contract authority and obligation limitation for increased commercial motor vehicle safety enforcement, improved data collection and safety technology deployment.

Looking towards and preparing for the future, the Department will continue to actively seek input and involvement from all those who have a stake and interest in this important part of the overall transportation safety challenge we collectively face. We are continuously evaluating our programs and measuring results and have created a safety program evaluation office within the FHWA singularly devoted to this task. We will be continuously monitoring the effectiveness of our programs while also looking for new opportunities to improve truck safety.

To that end, the Department has supported a 90-day independent review, which began at the end of February, of its comprehensive motor carrier safety programs to determine further actions and strategies that will help us meet our goal of reducing fatalities. The review is being conducted by former Representative Norman Mineta. The results of Mr. Mineta's review, along with those of the General Accounting Office, the DOT Inspector General, and, of course, the Congress will be carefully considered as the Department continues to strengthen its overall motor carrier safety program for the future. The Department is committed to including those who have a role in improving highway safety--across the Department, in the States and localities, and in the public and private sector -- in an aggressive campaign to reduce fatalities from truck and bus crashes. Together, we believe we will be able to achieve significant reductions in truck and bus related deaths, injuries and property losses.

That concludes my testimony. I will be glad to answer any questions the Committee may have.